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ABSTRACT

One possible unit on interpersonal communication and aging consists of five components: interpersonal attraction, talk with friends and neighbors, marital communication, family communication, and personal communication with service providers. The component on interpersonal attraction explains the complex relationship of age to attraction, while the component on talk with friends and neighbors shows that the elderly live in a social world very similar to the college student--both see friends and neighbors come and go and must replace friends to avoid isolation. The component on marital communication presents a realistic picture of romantic communication through the life cycle, acquaints students with theory relevant to marital communication, and reviews extant research on communication between older partners. The component on family communication and aging presents communication theory relevant to family interactions that include older members and reviews research on communication within the older family. Finally, the component on personal communication with service providers addresses two issues: (1) to what extent do social programs for the elderly facilitate meaningful social interaction? and (2) how can practitioners and clients communicate so that the goals of each will be accomplished with minimal discomfort? (Appendixes provide bibliographies for each component.) (HOD)

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Teaching Implications: Components of a Unit on Interpersonal Communication and Aging

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Running Head: Interpersonal Comm

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Teaching Implications: Components of a Unit on Interpersonal Communication and Aging

Abstract

The paper presents a unit on interpersonal communication and aging that could be included in both gerontology and communication courses. The unit is comprised of five components: interpersonal attraction, talk with friends and neighbors, marital communication, family communication, and personal communication with service providers. Objectives, content, and learning activities are provided for each component.

Teaching Implications: Components of a Unit on Interpersonal Communications and Aging

In 1975 the first article on communication and aging appeared in a scholarly journal of speech communication. In the essay, Hawkins identified "a real need to develop educational programs that involve the aged" (p. 2). He urged speech professionals to institute communication classes for older students and future service providers.

The following year Carmichael described communication and gerontology as interfacing disciplines that meet upon fertile ground for research. He identified many problems of the aged that "are directly related to communication" and urged communicologists to research gerontological issues relevant to the communication field (1976, p. 121).

Due in part to Hawkins' and Carmichael's encouragement, numerous professional activities in the speech-communication field focused on communication and aging during the late 1970's and early 1980's. Research reports and pedagogical essays appeared in scholarly journals and on convention programs. Additionally, the Speech Communication Association (the national professional association for speech-communication professors) formed its Commission on Communication and Aging "to promote education, research, service and consulting in communication and aging" (Bylaws of the Commission, Article 2). These professional activities led to general recognition of a new specialty in the field of speech-communication: communication and aging.

Communication and aging specialists are producing a growing body of research which makes a significant contribution to both the fields of

gerontology and speech communication. When these recent findings are combined with previous research conducted by social gerontologists, the resultant body of literature is sizable and impressive; it provides enough material for a course solely on the subject of communication and aging. Similarly, ample content is available for a unit on communication and aging in a gerontology or speech-communication course.

A growing number of college-level speech programs include courses on communication and aging in their curricula. Interdisciplinary gerontology centers welcome the classes and often include them on the list of recommended courses for gerontology students. The classes prove very popular with both speech and non-speech majors; they attract practitioners as well as students from many disciplines.

How are communication and aging classes structured? Following Carmichael's (1976) organizational schema, most classes contain at least three primary units: (1) intrapersonal communication or information processing, (2) interpersonal communication or social interaction, and (3) mass communication or mediated messages (1976, p. 121). Interpersonal communication is perhaps the unit most interesting to practitioners and students because it addresses the pragmatic issues of what to say and how to converse with an older client, neighbor, friend, or family member.

Despite the growing body of research and the growing number of courses on communication and aging, few instructional materials are available on the subject. Only two textbooks and one booklet of structured learning exercises are currently being published (viz., Fleimuth and Jamieson 1979; Oyer and Oyer 1976; Tamir 1979).

The purpose of this paper is to present a unit on interpersonal communication that may be used in a variety of graduate and upper-division undergraduate classes. The unit is comprised of five components: (1)

interpersonal attraction, (2) talk with friends and neighbors, (3) marital communication, (4) family communication, and (5) personal communication with service providers. An extensive bibliography is available for each component. (See Appendix A.)

The unit may be used as a whole in either an introduction to gerontology course or in a communication and aging class. However, individual components may be lifted intact and used separately for specialized courses. For example, many speech-communication programs offer courses in family communication. The component presented here on family communication and aging could be presented in a family communication class. Similarly, gerontology courses specifically designed to train practitioners could include the component on personal communication with service providers.

Interpersonal Attraction and Older Adults

Many students assume that interpersonal attraction depends solely on physical appearance. Thus, they believe that older people with gray hair, wrinkles, and other physiological manifestations of the aging process are perceived by individuals of all ages as less attractive than younger people. However, theory and research on impression formation suggests that three factors influence interpersonal attraction: physical appearance, similarity of attitudes, and impressions of behavior (Huston and Levinger 1978, pp. 120-124). Thus, the relationship between age and interpersonal attraction is not as simple as students suppose.

Indeed, some research findings suggest that age is negatively correlated with physical attractiveness (Burns 1978). However, most studies indicate that age fails to influence attraction in the presence of more salient information such as perceived similarity of attitudes between self and the other (Griffitt, Nelson, and Littlepage 1972). Additionally,

research indicates that older adults apply different criteria than younger adults when judging interpersonal attractiveness (Cameron and Cromer 1974). The objective of the component on interpersonal attraction is to explain the complex relationship of age to interpersonal attraction.

Content	Learning Activities
1. Overview of theory and research on interpersonal attraction (Huston and Levinger 1978)	Lecture
2. Research on interpersonal attraction and older adults	Student reports. Each student chooses one journal article from a prepared bibliography and completes a 1-2 page written abstract and a 5 minute in-class report on the research.
3. Assessment of present knowledge base; suggestions for future research	Lecture and class discussion

Talk with Friends and Neighbors

Research suggests that, in the absence of family, elders rely on neighbors and friends for day-to-day assistance with routine activities as well as help in times of crisis (Rosow 1970). Yet neighbors and friends who play this important role may die, enter a nursing home, or move to a retirement home. Mobility problems may restrict visitation with friends who relocate. Thus, the elderly live in a social world very similar to the

college student: friends and neighbors come and go for understandable reasons; the secret to social survival is replacing friends before isolation sets in.

Psychologists, sociologists, and communicologists have studied friendship patterns of the elderly for over two decades. The resultant literature can be divided into early work that shaped our notions about friendship in old age (e.g., Bultena 1968) and more recent research that addresses the varied and changing lifestyles of the elderly (e.g., Nussbaum 1983). The objective of the component on talk with friends and neighbors is to present pertinent research in such a way that students understand its implications and can suggest relevant future studies.

Content	Learning Activities
1. Early, transcendent considerations of friendship in old age	Lecture Reading Assignment (Blau 1961; Rosow 1970)
2. Recent research on talk between elders and their friends and neighbors	Student reports Reading assignment (Tamir 1979, pp. 112-150) Field trip to local retirement community; discussion with tenant council re: interaction patterns
3. Assessment of present knowledge base; suggestions for future research	Lecture and class discussion

Marital Communication of Older Couples

Students may believe that the communication between mature marital partners is limited in scope. Citing cases of older couples who never touch in public and grandparents who refer to each other as "Mom" and "Dad", they assume that during the later stages of life most affectionate communication is directed toward offspring rather than mate. Students should be alerted to the reality of intimate life: love, sex, and all forms of romantic communication continue well past puberty!

A thorough consideration of marital communication must go beyond consciousness raising to a scholarly examination of intimate messages in both their verbal and nonverbal forms. Given the cultural myths surrounding the sexual behavior of older adults, theory and research about intimate nonverbal communication should be addressed. Additionally, the unit may include communication theory relevant to the dynamics of intimate verbal communication and a review of research that specifically examines communication of older couples.

The objectives of the component on marital communication are (1) to present a realistic picture of romantic communication through the life cycle, (2) to acquaint students with communication theory relevant to an examination of marital communication, and (3) to review extant research on marital communication between older partners.

Content	Learning Activities
1. Sexual Behavior of older adults[1]	Film (Allyn 1981)
	Reading Assignment (Travris 1977)
a. enumerate normal physiological changes that effect normal sexual functioning	Lecture

Content	Learning Activities
b. discuss normative patterns of sexual behavior	
2. Use of touch as a nonverbal communication (Malandro and Barker 1983) a. functions of touch b. norms of touch c. messages of touch d. effects of touch	Lecture
3. Intimate verbal communication (Littlejohn 1983, pp. 161-216) a. relational communication b. attribution theory c. self-disclosure d. interpersonal conflict resolution	Lecture
4. Research on marital communication of older couples	Reading Assignment (Stinnett, Carter, and Montgomery 1972) Student reports

Family Communication and Aging

Twenty-five years of research indicates that older Americans maintain regular and frequent contact with family members. Shanas' review of 1957,

1962, and 1975 survey data revealed that 80% of the noninstitutionalized elders had seen at least one child during the week before the interview (1979, p. 6). A nationwide Louis Harris poll reported that 73% of the grandparents age 65 or older had seen a grandchild within the last week or so (Harris 1975, p. 73).

Given this high frequency of contact, one might assume that most elders find their family interactions satisfying and rewarding. However, Heltsley and Powers (1975) found no relationship between elders' frequency of social contact with family members and perceived adequacy of those interactions. Perhaps quality of communication is more important than quantity of interaction. Oyer and Oyer expressed this notion in the opening paragraphs of the first textbook on communication and aging:

> Communication in and of itself gives neither assurance of happiness nor enrichment of life. It can, quite to the contrary, contribute to unhappiness and feelings of deterioration of self-worth. Quite obviously the content and the quality of the message make the difference. (1976, p. 1)

Analysis of quality issues is a difficult task. Although the dynamics of family interaction fascinate investigators, their bewildering complexity appears to defy analysis. Fortunately, communicologists with long-term experience in analysis of small group communication have recently focused scholarly attention on family interaction. Similarly, social gerontologists have produced a rich body of literature about the older family. These perspectives can be combined to address issues about the quantity and quality of family communication through the life cycle.

The objectives of the component on family communication and aging are (1) to present communication theory relevant to family interactions that

include older members and (2) to review research on communication within the older family.

Content	Learning Activities
1. Relevant communication theory (Galving and Brommel 1982)	Lecture
a. system theory	Role playing exercise (Osterkamp 1982)
b. rules theory	
c. network theory	
d. power theory	
2. Research on family communication and aging	Reading assignment (Hess and Waring 1978)
a. factors that influence the frequency of interaction	Student reports
b. factors that influence the quality of interaction	
c. communication with extended family	

Personal Communication with Service Providers

A consideration of personal communication and social service delivery to the elderly may focus on two central issues: (1) Do social service programs for the aged facilitate meaningful social interaction that contributes to feelings of self-worth? (2) When, in the course of their duties, service providers attempt to discover personal information about an older client, how should the interactants communicate to achieve their goals with the least discomfort to both parties?

Many social service programs attempt to address the communication needs

of elders (e.g., Senior Companions Program, Foster Grandparents Programs, R.S.V.P., many nutrition programs). However, some programs claim to provide social interaction but fail to facilitate it; instead, they merely bring elders together to eat a meal, learn a craft, or do volunteer work and assume meaningful dialog will result. Often it does not.

Because the desire for meaningful social interaction is less visible and compelling than the need for food, clothing, housing, transportation, and utility bill relief, few social service programs provide social interaction as their primary mission. Indeed, communication needs have never been a funding priority for private or government grant agencies. How are such national priorities established? What are the funding priorities for aging programs right now? How do these priorities change? These and other relevant questions can be addressed by a guest lecturer from the local area agency on aging.

While an examination of service programs that facilitate social interaction is worthwhile, students may find the issue of appropriate practitioner-client dialogue more pragmatic and interesting. The complex communication problems inherent in practitioner-client interactions can fascinate even a naive analyst. For example, communication research indicates that adults typically disclose to intimates in a reciprocal manner (Pearce and Sharp 1973). In contrast, a practitioner often asks older clients to reveal personal information about health, income, and family in a very one-sided way to a stranger (the case worker) who they may see again. Such interactions violate self-disclosure norms or what the layperson may call "a sense of common decency."

The situation is further complicated by the status distinctions between client and service provider. Clients who are intimidated by the situation may speak from what Millar and Rogers (1976) called a one-down position

allow the other control). Some clients may treat the practitioner as a servant and speak from a one-up position (i.e., assert control). Meanwhile service providers also differ in their perspectives and may elect either a one-up or one-down posture. When both parties choose the same orientation, conflict may erupt. If both interactants elected a one-across position (i.e., neither assert control nor relinquish it), the probability of causing discomfort would be greatly reduced; but it can be difficult for both client and service provider to speak to each other as equals.

Some literature advises practitioners how to communicate effectively with elders (e.g., Pfeiffer 1974). However, most literature in the area describes observations of the interactions in their natural setting (e.g., Watson 1975). The reports suggest the need for improved practitioner-client interactions.

The objective of the component on personal communication with service providers is to present theory and research that addresses the two issues discussed herein: (1) To what extent do social service programs for the elderly facilitate meaningful social interaction? (2) How can practitioners and clients communicate so that the goals of each will be accomplished with minimal discomfort to both parties?

Content	Teaching Strategy
1. Social service programs: structure and function	Guest lecture by representative from local area agency on aging
a. History and purpose of social service delivery to the elderly	
b. Funding sources and priorities	

Content	Teaching Strategy
c. Enumeration of programs that provide social interaction	
2. Research on communication function of social service programs	Student reports
3. Communication theory relevant to client-practitioner interactions a. Interpersonal perception theory (Littlejohn 1983, pp. 182-185) b. Relational theory (Millar and Rogers 1976) c. Knowledge claims re: self-disclosure (Pearce and Sharp 1973)	Lecture Reading assignment (Barry 1980; Lipkin 1979)
4. Research on practitioner-older client interactions	Student reports
5. Assessing the communication patterns of service providers and social service programs	Lecture Field trips to local senior center, nursing home, nutrition program, etc.; discussion with elders and service providers

Comments

The unit on interpersonal communication herein discussed attempts to present theory, research, and practice relevant to the two complex processes of communication and aging. Further, it attempts to identify underlying issues present in intergenerational communication and offer tentative solutions. This material can fill a classroom with conflict and discussion or it can silence many voices by raising difficult, pragmatic questions. It can anger and it can console students. In short, it is explosive information that can turn an ordinary classroom discussion into an exciting learning experience.

Yet the material raises more questions than it answers because its literature base is incomplete. The communication and aging specialty is so young that its body of literature, though rich and varied, contains conflicting findings and great gaps. The research offers merely guidance with an occasional directive. Despite its shortcomings, the information is too pragmatic to remain in journals on library shelves; it can train future service providers to better serve elders and thus should be present in the classroom.

Notes

1. The context of the lecture may be obtained from articles listed in a bibliography titled "Aging and Sex Behavior," available at Information Service, Institute of Sex Research, 416 Morrison Hall, Indiana University, Bloomington, In. 47405.

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Appendix A

Bibliographies for Each Component

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Personal Communication with Service Providers

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